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Grieving as Limit Situation of Memory: Gadamer, Beamer, and Moules on the Infinite Task Posed by the Dead

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Abstract

In this paper, the author turns to Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics to examine the experience of grieving. Specifically, the author argues that grieving may be grasped as a limit situation of memory. This approach suggests that grieving cannot be adequately captured by a stage model theory but, instead, poses an infinite task that is fraught with difficulty and ethical demands. The author develops this approach in reference not only to Hans-Georg Gadamer but recent research by Nancy Moules and Kate Beamer.

Keywords

Gadamer, philosophical hermeneutics, grief, memory

One of Karl Jaspers' most influential ideas is that human beings can become aware of decisive terms of their existence through "limit situations" (Jaspers, 1969). By this, Jaspers has in mind that the character of existence becomes clearest to us through the most extreme moments of our lives; that we can learn something decisive about what it is to be human, to be a person, to be a self, when the situations we find ourselves in press us to the very limits of our existence. Of course, Jaspers' notion of the limit situation plays a specific role in his own program of research. But, in the days, weeks, and now months since my father's death, I continue to come back to the idea that we can, and perhaps should, also identify as a limit situation the experience of grieving.

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Specifically, I wish to suggest that grieving may be grasped, at least in part, as a limit situation of memory.

While the *raison d'être* of this short piece is to reflect a little on this idea, it is not difficult to see why one might come to believe that grieving presses the possibilities of memory to the brink. For, whatever else grieving involves, grieving confers to memory the monstrous challenge of cherishing, protecting, and fostering a relation with one who, because dead, is no longer able to relate to us, as they say, in the flesh.

Obviously, this short piece can only be considered preliminary and exploratory, given that I do not situate my considerations within the larger context of current debate on grieving. I have, however, found orientation in (and will refer to at least tangentially) Kate Beamer's essay, "And the Coyote Howled: Listening to the Call of Interpretive Inquiry," as well as Nancy Moules' editorial piece, "Grief and Hermeneutics: Archives of Lives and the Conflicted Character of Grief," both found in this issue.

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It should not surprise us that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics sheds light on some of the limits at issue in the experience of grieving. This is not only because of Gadamer's relation to Jaspers—the fact that Gadamer held Jaspers in esteem (Grondin, 2003, pp. 209–210) or that Gadamer has suggested affinities between his approach and Jaspers' notion of situation, (Gadamer, 2003, p. 301). More still, Gadamer's elucidation of our efforts to understand brings into focus something of a limit situation of memory that speaks to the experience of grieving. This limit situation derives from Gadamer's claim that memory is not to be grasped first of all as a "psychological phenomenon," but, rather, as "an essential element of the finite historical being of human being" (Gadamer, 2003, p. 16). Gadamer, we recall, eschews pretenses of knowledge claims that purport to transcend all historical conditions. Quite to the contrary, he argues that the hermeneutical experience of understanding remains always conditioned by what he calls prejudice, or, historically inherited meanings that not only limit but first make possible our efforts to understand and, moreover, abide even when our efforts to understand unfold and come to fruition. Our efforts to understand neither aim at, nor admit of, indubitable foundations of knowledge, but, instead, seek always to discern and develop novel insight from out of the inherited meanings that have survived across what he once alludes to as the conflagration of history (Gadamer, 2007, p. 200). "We understand in a *different* way," as Gadamer puts the point, "*if we understand at all*" (Gadamer, 2003, p. 297). As his elucidation suggests, however, our efforts to understand are thus really nothing else than efforts to recollect, to collect again, always in new and different manners, meaning that remains available to us from the past.

That Gadamer's elucidation of hermeneutical experience points to a limit situation of memory is apparent from his description of understanding as an infinite task. Our efforts to understand never admit of finality or closure. This is, first of all, because hermeneutical experience is characterized by the facticity of existence (Gadamer, 2003, p. 254). The situations we find ourselves in constantly shift, change, and evolve, so that we are led to bring novel questions to bear on our efforts to understand new matters as well as matters that we have already sought to understand before. Over the course of our experience, though, we find that we seek to understand

some matters over and over, while others fade from focus to fringe. This, in turn, is because such matters prove to be relevant time and again, perhaps even in unexpected ways; and, however often we return to them, our efforts to understand them seem always genuinely to yield something new, something different. No matter how much our situations shift, change, and evolve, there appear to be certain life events, certain encounters and relationships with others, certain texts and works of art, that are inexhaustible in their significance.

It is here, in our efforts to understand such matters of inexhaustible significance, that Gadamer's approach suggests a limit situation of memory. If our efforts to understand are nothing else than attempts to recollect, as Gadamer suggests, then matters of inexhaustible significance are not only so indispensable that we return to them time and again. Moreover, at the same time, these matters are likewise impossible to recollect with any finality and closure.

Gadamer's approach to the motif of memory helps, I think, give contour to the limit-character of grieving. In my experience of my father's death, much of my grieving has coalesced in efforts to understand. These efforts include the imponderables—Why now? Why cancer? How do I understand this sadness? How do I understand myself, all my aspirations and insecurities, my relations to kin, kind, and community now that my father is gone? But these efforts are also directed more concretely toward what can perhaps be grasped as texts left behind by my father's death or in reference to what Moules calls "archives of lives" (Moules, 2017). As for Moules, so for me too, my father's death has deposited troves of materials in my life—in my case, legal documents, his books (sometimes dog-eared or with notes in the margins), his military keepsakes, magazine article cutouts with features about him, his law firm, or members of his family, photographs, and, of course, too, ashes of his remains. If my grieving has taken shape in efforts to understand, however, this process is perhaps best grasped in terms of the limit situation of memory. Already, it appears that my experience of my father's death will prove to be an event inexhaustible in significance to me. In this, however, my efforts to understand and, with them, to remember my father, also already strike me as an infinite task, at once indispensable and impossible to bring to a close.

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The idea that grieving can, at least in part, be grasped as a limit situation of memory also brings important further considerations to mind. First, this idea may contribute to discussion (or, in any case, at least suggest further evidence) of Beamer's (2017) and Moules' (2017) rejection of stage model theories of grieving in favor of the idea that "grief is an experience that is ongoing, that changes in nature over time, but that involves a continuing relationship with the deceased" (Moules, Simonson, Prins, & Angus, 2004, p. 2). As Moules furthers this approach in her editorial, grief is "complicated"; "It involves moving back and forth between memory, love, anger, disappointment, reality, romance, gratitude, admiration, regret, and history" (Moules, 2017, p. 2).

The idea that grieving is bound up with a limit situation of memory, too, recommends not a stage model but, instead, a more expansive conception of grieving. For, if grieving involves us in a limit situation of memory, then grieving poses an infinite task, and thus not one that can be reduced to a predefined series of stages and predetermined terminus. Grieving remains unending

because, as a limit situation of memory, it can become as necessary for our lives as it is impossible to finish with. It can be necessary whenever the death of another person (but perhaps not only a person) proves to be a crucial event in our lives—whenever, that is, another person's death becomes a question for us that we cannot help but pose to ourselves and to the world we find ourselves in. And, whenever grieving thus becomes necessary, it is just as much impossible to finish with. When the death of another person proves to be relevant for so many of the situations we find ourselves in, when it proves to be a renewed source of meaning and orientation, and, with this, of joy and sadness, then, in such a case, grieving is not something to get through, get past, or get over, but, rather, becomes an integral part of one's life.

The idea that grieving can, at least in part, be grasped as a limit situation of memory may also give further contour to what Beamer takes up in reference to the "trickster" figure in the folklore of many cultures (Beamer, 2017, p. 4; cf. Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015, p. 2). In this, Beamer takes her point of departure from an intense experience she had after her spouse's funeral of what she describes in terms of the Coyote figure of the trickster. On the impetus provided by this experience, Beamer draws an analogy between aspects of the practice of hermeneutic research and the experience of grieving, arguing that both, like Coyote, are unpredictable, unfold in surprises, and that, because of this, both require the virtues of patience, humility, and openness (Beamer, 2017).

While Beamer's approach far exceeds the scope of my reflections in this short piece, it is hard for me not to make a connection between her idea that grieving is inhabited by a trickster and the notion of grieving as a limit situation of memory. In this, I wonder whether the trickster may be said (or said also) to carry out her pranks precisely at this limit. As the situations we find ourselves in constantly shift, change, and evolve, so too our attempts to remember. We attempt to recollect different matters, or the matters we have recollected before collect themselves in novel and different manners, often without warning and in surprising ways. And, too, the matters themselves may be filled with tricks: perhaps, we recollect something in one manner, trusting our memory of it, only to find in the next moment that this recollection contained a ruse, say, that one aspect of what we remember turns out really only to distort or conceal another more crucial aspect.

The idea that grieving is bound up with a limit situation of memory may, finally, also lead us to a consideration of the ethical profile of our relation to the deceased. The consideration I have in mind is perhaps drawn out most fully in Jacques Derrida's approach to the death of the friend in his essay, "Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem." It is not insignificant for my brief remarks here that Derrida first developed these reflections on the death of the friend on the occasion of Gadamer's death. In "Rams," Derrida cites a passage from Paul Celan's poetry to help describe the experience of the death of a friend. The passage reads: "the world is gone, I must carry you" (Derrida, 2005, p. 141). There is much to be said, and much has been said, about the occasion of Derrida's "Rams" and his use of Celan's poem, not to mention Celan's poem itself. What strikes me within the present context, however, is that the verb "to carry" invoked by Celan provides something of a *motto* for the ethical profile of grieving. While our friend or loved one is still alive, our relation is, or at least can be, carried out by us both, mutually, and in the flesh. Once our friend or loved one is dead, however, our relation can no longer be carried out by us both in the flesh but must rather be carried on only by the survivor,

and only in memory. If grieving involves us in the limit situation of memory, and, indeed, a limit that makes of grieving an infinite task, then this entails the ethical demand to carry the memory of the dead.

The difficulty of this ethical demand is, no doubt, indicated by the fact that it refuses to be addressed in predictable stages and, for that matter, resists ever being completely fulfilled. The difficulty of this demand is further indicated by Moules' suggestion that grieving is complicated, as well as Beamer's suggestion that a trickster is at work (and play) in our efforts to grieve. The demand to carry the memory of the deceased is as arduous as it is perilous, fraught with jeopardies, as well as with an entire round dance of thoughts, emotions, and ups and downs. Yet, it should be mentioned that the verb "to carry," both in English and in Celan's original German (*tragen*), also connotes the anticipated arrival of new life. To carry, this also means: to be pregnant with an unborn child, to hope for and tend as best one can for livebirth, and to prepare the world for the child's arrival. If Celan's poem speaks to the ethical demand to carry the memory of the deceased, then his turn of phrase suggests that this demand is as much about the future as the past. In this, the ethical demand to carry the memory of the deceased into the future is, at the same time, a promise of novelty, both for ourselves and for the memory of our friend or loved one as we seek to carry on unaccompanied.

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